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ABSTRACT

This paper contends that modern compositionist courses have successfully met the goal of training students to become socially productive citizens by teaching them to be proficient "readers" who critically examine the sources and dissemination of knowledge, but that the field has fallen short of its goal of training students to actively produce their own knowledge because it is presenting a restricted view of what it means to "write" well. The paper argues that because most English departments focus on reading and interpretation of texts, the majority of students who take freshman composition leave believing that "good" writing means grammatically correct writing rather than writing that is morally or politically engaged or writing that constructs or produces new forms of knowledge. By examining the standard departmental syllabi, anthologies, writing handbook, and grading sheet for the 2-semester Freshman Composition sequence at the University of Georgia, the paper shows how reading is privileged over writing and how this hierarchy results in an over-emphasis on writing as a rule-bound skill to be mastered rather than a meaningful way of inventing new ideas and encouraging civic engagement. The paper first gives a brief overview of the history of rhetoric and then examines a syllabus from "a typical large land-grant university" (University of Georgia) to show that many freshman composition courses are still rooted in 19th-century concerns, and that this results in students achieving the status of "reflective" citizen "readers," but falling short of becoming "active" citizen "rhetors." (Contains 10 references. Course materials are attached.) (NKA)

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Reading, Writing, and Rhetoric: The Three R's of Civic Education

D. Alexis Hart

Contemporary composition courses continue to struggle with the age-old conflict between rhetoric as a knowledge-producing/knowledge-investigating discipline designed to train socially active citizens and rhetoric as a skills discipline meant to produce polished professionals who can write "correctly." I acknowledge Dr. Sledd's point that compositionists' "proper" concern is the "important service" they're paid to do—"helping students learn the kinds of writing most likely to be used in other courses and in careers after formal education" (7). In fact, I contend that modern composition courses have successfully met the goal of training students to become socially productive citizens by teaching them to be proficient *readers* who critically examine the sources and the dissemination of knowledge, but that the field has fallen short of its goal of training students to actively produce their own knowledge because it is presenting a restricted view of what it means to *write* well. Here I agree with Dr. Sledd when he says that English departments "should provide genuinely higher education in *writing* as well as reading" (2, emphasis added). Because most English departments focus on reading and the interpretation of texts, the majority of students who take freshman composition leave believing that "good" writing means grammatically-correct writing rather than writing that is morally or politically engaged or writing that constructs or produces new forms of knowledge. By examining the standard departmental syllabi, anthologies, writing handbook, and grading sheet for the two semester Freshman Composition sequence at the University of Georgia, I will show how reading is privileged over writing and how this hierarchy results in an over-emphasis on writing as a rule-bound skill to be mastered rather than a meaningful way of inventing new ideas and encouraging civic engagement.

The association of rhetoric with training in citizenship and the production of knowledge arguably began with Isocrates. Isocrates was among the first educators committed to writing as an important way of thinking and he sought to teach his students to become ethical citizens and active members of society through the proficient production of original texts. In the *Antidosis*, he argues that his pedagogy equips students to become successful citizens by requiring them to *produce* discourses which deal with the affairs of the state, which set forth facts in an imaginative and ornate style, and which employ lofty and original thoughts (47). He expected his curriculum to provide students with various resources that would allow them to address practical situations in the face of limited knowledge. He was aware that the habits of language learned and employed by his students would have lasting social and material consequences. Therefore, while Isocrates *did* encourage his students to find examples and seek inspiration by reading what he considered to be "noble" texts, he consciously did not privilege reading over original composition. In other words, although Isocrates clearly assigned texts meant to expose his students to "proper" moral values, more importantly, the readings were intended to prompt the *production* of new texts. According to Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg's anthology The Rhetorical Tradition, Isocrates' influential pedagogy "eventually [became] codified in the [European] trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic that remained unchanged until the Renaissance and was influential in liberal education thereafter" (43).

Some of the goals of the classical trivium included preparing students for public duty and developing their characters. Not surprisingly, historian James Berlin discovered that the classical course of study in early *American* colleges often centered on "a rhetoric of public service, a system distinguished by its ethical commitment to the public good" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 49). Likewise, in her research into the invention of Freshman English, Sharon Crowley found that the

goal of the classical course of study in American colleges "was to train good citizens to lead society" (47). When the study of Greek and Latin gave way to the study of the vernacular, the institutional goal of training "good" citizens transferred to departments of English as well. Near the end of the nineteenth century, American colleges changed to an elective, rather than a prescribed, curriculum. Perhaps by default, since the freshman writing course was (and is) one of the few required English courses at many institutions of higher education, the broad task of preparing students for public service took up residence there—and there it has remained.

As the nineteenth century progressed, instruction in the freshman writing courses began shift to what is now known as "current-traditional rhetoric," particularly at large state universities like the University of Georgia. As Berlin argues, this resulted in "invention as the discovery of the available means of persuasion [being] excluded from rhetoric and attention [being shifted] to arrangement—the modes of discourse—and style, now conceived as superficial correctness" ("Writing Instruction" 189). Sharon Crowley also dates the arrival of "the perfect composition, which centers on mechanical correctness and formal perfection" (27) in the late nineteenth century in conjunction with the development of the modern university. According to Crowley, "when American rhetoric teachers finished their revision of rhetorical pedagogy in the late 19th century, the only bits of classical invention that remained were the topics, put to humble—and literate—service as a means for paragraph development" (35). Unlike Isocrates, who did not claim to be able to teach knowledge or virtue but desired to use writing instruction to augment and promote sound judgment (what we might call "critical consciousness"), nineteenth century English departments, says Crowley, were infused with the humanist goal "not to create better writers but to display the cultivated character that is the sign of an educated person" (86). Humanist composition instruction, therefore, began to focus on having students "[read] the right

texts" (86).

What became lost, according to Berlin, was "the historical concern of rhetoric for practical action in areas of public concern affecting all citizens. Where this concern is lost," he continues, "rhetoric [the *production* of spoken and written texts] becomes subsumed by poetic [the *interpretation* of texts] and becomes a *reflective* discipline rather than an *active* discipline" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 52-53). I will now examine the freshman composition syllabus from a typical large land-grant university, the University of Georgia, in order to show that many freshman composition courses are still rooted in nineteenth century concerns, and that this results in a our students achieving the status of *reflective* citizen *readers*, but falling short of becoming *active* citizen *rhetors*.

For example, a cursory glance through the titles of the required reading assignments on the standard departmental syllabus for the first-semester freshman composition course at the University of Georgia ("Argument") quickly reveals that today's composition students are meant to learn to become good American citizens by *reading* and *interpreting* texts selected to teach them to examine the contextual nature of knowledge and to broaden their cultural and social horizons by confronting issues of race, class, gender, morality, etc. [See attached] As you can see here, concerning the issue of gender, students are required to read Adrienne Rich's speech to the 1979 graduating class of Smith College, "What Does a Woman Need to Know," which describes women as "anonymous, censored, interrupted, devalued," "denied equal rights as citizens, enslaved as sexual prey, [and] unpaid or underpaid as workers," as well as Sojourner Truth's suffrage speech to the Women's Rights Convention of 1851, "Ain't I a Woman," in which she predicts that "'twixt the negroes of the South and the women of the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon." They also read Dave Barry's humorous

introduction to his 1995 book Dave Barry's Complete Guide to Guys: A Fairly Short Book, in which he characterizes the "Men's Movement" as being "densely populated with loons and goobers." Concerning the issue of race, they are required to read selections by Martin Luther King Jr. and Zora Neale Hurston. Concerning class and morality, the other examples you see here.

Clearly, the focus of this citizenship training is on reading, not writing. In fact, the very first sentence of the introduction to the required anthology (Andrea Lunsford and John Ruszkiewicz's The Presence of Others) declares it to be "a book for and about reading" (1). Of the 732 pages in the anthology, only 28 focus on writing. Furthermore, the single section devoted to writing does not present the production of original texts as a way for students to participate in our democracy, or a way to help them draw their own conclusions about "hot issues," but solely as a way for them to *respond* to what has already been thought and said by the authors they have read. Even the subtitle of the book, "Voices and Images that Call for Response," directs student's writing assignments toward *response*, rather than *invention*.

As I mentioned previously, Sharon Crowley attributes this respectful attitude toward already-completed texts to the legacy of the literary and humanist curriculum in English departments and the subsequent distancing of rhetoric from the classical course modeled on Isocrates. Unlike rhetoricians, who are primarily interested in texts currently in development as well as those yet to be written, literary scholars and humanists typically privilege reading over writing. Crowley goes on to remark that partially due to this legacy, and partially as a result of assigning a large number of graduate students of *literature* to teach the freshman composition course, "reading and the discussion of [what has been read] receive far more attention than does actual instruction in composition" (13). The UGA syllabus clearly reflects this fact. Of 43 class

meetings, only 18 focus on *any* aspect of writing, while the rest are reserved for discussions of the assigned reading. Of the 18 classes that do involve writing, 3 require the students to respond to the assigned reading, 3 are exercises in grammar, and 5 focus solely on finished products. Only 6, or less than 15% of the total classes, focus on student writing in-process, and *half* of these focus on organization and style rather than the quality or uniqueness of the students' ideas. Furthermore, reading-response journals or grammar logs make up over half of the approximately 50 pages of assigned writing, and most of the essay topics require responses to the reading as well.

Surprisingly, while the text for the second semester of Freshman Composition ("Literature") also highlights "special topics" in gender, race, class and morality [See attached], *it* makes the assertion that "students learn to write by writing" (vii). According to the editors of Making Literature Matter (John Schilb and John Clifford), their text is "distinguished by its emphasis on how to write *arguments* about literature [and how it encourages] students to see arguments as *civil inquiry*" (viii). The first 42 pages of this text are devoted to learning how to read literature, but the next 135 are ostensibly set aside to focus on writing. However, large portions of the sections on "writing" are devoted to discussing the formal elements of the various literary genres. Furthermore, out of over 300 pages of assigned reading, only about 6% are exclusively about writing. In addition, reading response journals still make up a considerable portion of the writing done in the course. Clearly, the focus is still on reading the literary texts and responding to them (particularly, as Crowley noted, when the course is taught by graduate students of literature who choose *not* to follow the departmental syllabus).

As I said before, the effect of weighting the requirements of composition courses more heavily toward reading than writing is a change in the focus of composition from primarily a

productive and *inventive* art to an *analytic* and *interpretive* one. I would argue with Isocrates that writing is meant to be a discipline that *discovers* new knowledge, not merely *presents* established ideas. Furthermore, as Berlin mentioned, when freshman composition courses focus more heavily on reading rather than writing, the objective of these courses shifts from the classical concern with *rhetoric* to a focus on *poetics*. This worrisome trend was criticized as early as 1938 by Warren Bower, a teacher at New York University, who reported that composition courses like the one at UGA that use a grammar handbook and an "omnibus" reader rather than more traditional rhetoric texts have the effect of making freshman composition a course in reading rather than writing since "more and more emphasis falls on reading as a desirable end in itself with an implied faith that if only a student will read enough good prose he [sic] will also be able to write it" (*Rhetoric and Reality* 71).

One problem with this faith in reading as a way of learning to write is that, unlike Isocrates' students, the selections the UGA students are required to read generally are *not* models of what they are being asked to write. As I showed you earlier, the UGA students are required to read personal narratives, graduation speeches, articles from popular periodicals, short stories, poems, and plays, but they are asked to *write* argumentative papers based on textual analysis, "outside" research, and the presentation of evidence. While practicing reading and interpreting texts may achieve the humanist goal of cultivating students' characters and give them a better idea of what is considered literate writing, it is less likely that intensive reading courses will help students generate innovative ideas, produce original knowledge, or even improve their own writing skills. In other words, the difference between reading as an activity and writing as an activity is that reading is primarily an act of *interpretation*, rather than *origination*.

One worry, therefore, of privileging reading over writing becomes that instead of doing

their own thinking, students will allow society, their professor, the textbook editors, or the authors in the anthology to do their thinking for them. Other worries are that students will not learn to see *themselves* as writers, may not see any value in developing their own theories, and may not be excited about having something to say. Instead, students may come to regard the completed and anthologized texts as "untouchable" and their own written work only as a test of how well they can interpret these definitive texts and how well they can follow the rules of grammar. These misunderstandings are often reinforced by the teacher's evaluation techniques because student writing usually is not evaluated either for the knowledge it produces or the potential contribution it might make to society. Furthermore, very little attention is paid to invention or the critical insight of the students' ideas. In the best-case scenarios, students' arguments are evaluated on their use of evidence and logical reasoning, their structural fluency, and the force of their presentation. In the worst-case scenarios, student papers are graded for "correctness" or mastery of sheer technique.

The legacy of prescriptive grammar and correctness, as David Bartholomae argues, has trapped composition teachers "within a discourse of error that makes it impossible to praise a student paper that is disordered and disorderly," no matter how ambitious and interesting an undertaking it may be (16). This prescriptive emphasis on orderliness and correctness and the lack of attention paid to student inventiveness and innovation can be seen on the UGA grading sheet. Although "Content" ostensibly counts for 25% of the overall grade, [See attached] only slightly more than half of this portion—the three comments: "controlling central idea," "valid logic" and "complexity and originality of analysis/response"—assess the quality of the ideas presented by the student. The other two comments evaluate how well the students interpret and present *someone else's* ideas (someone whose theories and texts are, by implication, more

worthwhile and interesting than the student's). As you can see, the remaining 75% of the student's paper is graded on organization, sentence style and syntax, diction, and grammar and mechanics. Unfortunately, as Sharon Crowley points out, this results in students' papers rarely being "regarded as messages that might command assent or rejection" (96). Furthermore, students' papers are rarely evaluated based on their suitability for a particular rhetorical situation either. In fairness, I must point out that the Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz anthology does have an accompanying handbook (*Everything's an Argument*) that is designed to familiarize students with some of the classical rhetorical elements of argumentation such as consideration of audience, presentation of evidence, and logical and emotional appeals. However, I do not think I would be unfair in assuming, along with Crowley, that most freshman composition teachers read student papers "not to learn or be amused or persuaded but to weigh and measure a paper's adherence to formal standards" (96).

Bartholomae also laments the widespread lack of notice or responsibility taken by composition teachers "for the forms of knowledge being produced through [student] writing" (15). Not surprisingly, many composition teachers feel uncomfortable when asked to evaluate students' characters and the quality of the sentiments they express rather than their mastery of a subject matter, especially when these teachers are being held accountable by the rest of the institution (and much of society-at-large) for students' writing deficiencies. "Ostensibly," says Crowley, "academics in all disciplines want the required first-year course to teach students how to write. Here writing seems to mean that students are supposed to master principles of arrangement and sentence construction; they are also to learn correct grammar and usage" (7). Certainly it is much easier to grade a student on the correctness of his or her grammar, spelling, and punctuation than the more ephemeral measurement of the merit or quality of his or her

arguments, particularly when the most promising student arguments—the ones that show real inventiveness and risk—are often clumsy and awkwardly presented. So, by using an administratively-approved grading sheet, like the one seen here, instructors are less likely to have to justify a student's grade (either to the student, the student's parents, his or her academic advisor, or anyone else) and a student is quickly able to see where he or she made "errors" as well as what he or she has to "fix" in order to get a higher grade next time.

In fact, all he or she has to do is open up the grammar handbook for the course (The New St. Martin's Handbook), which offers an introductory section outlining "the twenty most common errors" and an accompanying 430 pages or so detailing how to remedy those and other errors. This all translates to students leaving the course with the understanding that writing well simply means mastering the principles of arrangement, sentence construction, grammar, spelling and diction, no matter how dull or unimaginatively an argument is presented. Sadly, the students are not the only ones who leave the class thinking this. Many of their instructors believe this too. Just the other day, I ran into one of my fellow graduate students and asked him how his semester was going. "Really well," he replied, "I am teaching a sophomore survey in American Literature. It is so much better than teaching *commas*."

I contend that as long as freshman composition courses like the one at UGA focus heavily on reading and textual interpretation and reduce writing to mastery of grammar and formulaic arrangement, they have a fighting chance of producing students who understand the rules of sentence construction, spelling and punctuation, who can succeed in future college classes and in the job market, and who have internalized what is expected of "proper" American citizens, which, as Dr. Sledd has told us, *are* valuable goals, but until these courses make a concerted effort to focus on student writing and student ideas, they will *not* meet Isocrates' goal

of training citizens who are able to write socially-engaged, imaginative, and original arguments that can have a practical and meaningful impact on their communities and the chances of opposing what Dr. Sledd has dubbed the "new Evil Empire" (8) will be limited as well.

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Sample of Assigned Readings

First Semester ("Argument") Anthology: The Presence of Others	Second Semester ("Literature") Anthology: Making Literature Matter
Gender - Adrienne Rich "What Does a Woman Need to Know?" - Sojourner Truth "Ain't I a Woman?" - Dave Barry "Guys vs. Men"	**Gender** - Andrew Marvell "To His Coy Mistress" - Robert Browning "My Last Duchess" - William Shakespeare *The Tempest*
Race - Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail" - Zora Neale Hurston "How it Feels to be a Colored Me"	**Race** - Jamaica Kincaid "Girl" - Ralph Ellison "Battle Royal" - Langston Hughes "Theme for English B"
Class - bell hooks "Keeping Close to Home: Class and Education" - Alice Walker "The Place Where I Was Born"	**Class** - Herman Melville "Bartleby the Scrivener" - Michael Paul Rogin "Class Struggles in America"
Morality - Mark Clayton "A Whole Lot of Cheatin' Going On" - Carol Gilligan "Concepts of Self and Morality"	**Morality** - Eudora Welty "A Visit of Charity" - Rebecca Brown "The Gift of Sweat"

GRADING SCALE - ENGL1101/1102/1030

1 - Poor 2 - Weak 3 - Average 4 - Above Average 5 - Excellent

I. Content

controlling central idea
inclusion of supporting details and specifics
appropriate use of supporting quotations
valid logic used throughout
complexity and originality of analysis/response 1 2 3 4 5

II. Organization

clear, specific thesis statement
consistent focus on idea established in thesis statement
opening that engages audience and clearly positions paper
thoughtful conclusion that goes beyond repetition of main points
effective topic sentences
fully developed, unified paragraphs
effective transition between paragraphs
coherence between sentences and ideas 1 2 3 4 5

Subtotal: ____x 5 = ____

III. Sentence Style and Syntax

use of syntactically correct sentences
use of felicitous, varied sentence structures
avoidance of unnecessary passive voice, expletive constructions
consistent/appropriate use of present and past tenses
appropriate integration of quotations
avoidance of wordiness 1 2 3 4 5

IV. Diction

denotatively and connotatively correct word choice
avoidance of cliches, colloquialisms, and jargon
avoidance of redundancy and vague/ambiguous language
use of concrete, specific diction
use of appropriate level of language formality
words spelled correctly 1 2 3 4 5
appropriate use of prepositions

Subtotal: ____ x 3 = ____

V. Grammar and Mechanics

correct documentation
correct works cited format
correct punctuation
Editing Errors: Papers that contain, in any combination, four of the major editing errors listed below will receive an editing failure.

FR fragment FS fused sentence CS comma splice
AGR pronoun or subject-verb agreement error AP apostrophe error

If the paper contains less than four editing errors, I will assign a 5 for 0-1 grammar/mechanics errors (including editing errors), a 4 for 2 errors, a 3 for 3-4 errors, a 2 for 5-6 errors, and 1 for 7-9 errors.

1 2 3 4 5

Subtotal: ____ x 4 = ____

Total: _____

A = 90-100
B = 75-89
C = 55-74
D = 45-54
F = 0-44

EDITING FAILURE = 20